



GUIDELINES FOR PHASED REOPENING OF CHURCHES IN WEST TEXAS

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INTRODUCTION TO DIOCESAN GUIDELINES AND EXPECTATIONS

From the beginning of the pandemic, the Diocese of West Texas has tried to follow Jesus as we took each “next right step.” We have sought in word and deed, *and in the Guidelines*, to be cautious, but not fearful; to acknowledge anxiety, but not surrender to it; and to make decisions grounded in hope rather than wishful thinking. We have also asked God’s grace to give us wisdom, courage, and humility - humility so that we might be open to the knowledge and guidance of medical and scientific professionals.

Every requirement, recommendation, and explanation contained in the Diocesan Guidelines can be summed up in Jesus’ commands that we love one another as he loves us and that we love our neighbor as we love ourselves. As local churches implement the Phase 2(c) revisions, some may feel it is too soon to make changes and others may feel the changes are not enough. Love your neighbor, anyway; love one another like Jesus loves you.

These Guidelines are intended to help your church plan, facilitate, and continually assess its reopening, so that people may begin to return to the worship life they so deeply long for, in the safest way possible and mindful that risk remains.

Clergy and Vestries/Bishop’s Committees are reminded that the diocesan guidelines give you full authority to make decisions based on your own congregation and the local COVID-19 situation. However, the diocesan Guidelines for Phased Reopening are not optional. Your church’s leadership may choose to do more than the Guidelines require, but they may not do less.

Listening to local health officials is crucial, and everyone should understand that a congregation or the diocese as a whole may need to return to a full suspension of all in-person gatherings. All plans these days are subject to change. Each church has its own particular characteristics that should be considered when deciding whether to hold in-person worship services.

Church leaders should focus on what they believe is the best for their congregants and staff in regard to resuming, continuing, or pausing in-person worship. Size of the congregation, age of members, number of families, size of the worship space, number of available staff and volunteers are all significant factors to consider. They should also value and seek out regular conversation and collaboration with neighboring churches to support and learn from one another.

The Guideline’s Appendix include a list of questions suggested by the Diocesan Office to guide conversation and decisions about reopening (or reclosing), forms, an overview of diocesan communications related to COVID-19, and recommended resources.

As clergy and congregational leadership continues to make decisions regarding suspending or resuming in-person worship services or gatherings, please keep Archdeacon Mike Besson, at mike.besson@dwtx.org, informed. The diocesan office receives frequent questions from clergy and lay leaders throughout the diocese, wondering what other churches are doing, and being able to provide relatively current responses is helpful to our shared ministry.

PHASES FOR REOPENING THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF WEST TEXAS

The guidelines for each phase represent the minimum recommended health protocols for all churches, congregations, and places of worship in West Texas. Churches, congregations, and places of worship may adopt additional protocols consistent with their specific needs and circumstances to help protect the health and safety of all.

Phase 1: Stay at Home Orders and Work Safe (March 18 – May 24, 2020)

The Church Responds: Moratorium on public worship, whether inside or outside the church building or at a different location; online and live-streaming church begins. All in-person church meetings, events, and gatherings canceled. Video-conferencing becomes a part of our life together. Church schools close and move instruction online. Church offices close. Diocesan office closes.

Phase 2(a): A Modified Return to Public Worship (May 25- September 13, 2020)

The Church Responds: Church offices with facilities that can accommodate proper social distancing and proper sanitizing may reopen. Modified in-person worship begins with proactive health and safety protocols in place. Online worship continues as a supplement to in-person worship. In-person vestry/bishop's committee meetings, 12-Step Recovery meetings, and limited outreach ministries permitted, using same protocols as in-person gatherings for worship (detailed below).

Phase 2(b): A Modified Return to Congregational Life (September 14, 2020 – April 21, 2021)

The Church Responds: In addition to the activities included in Phase 2(a), in-person gatherings for Adult Bible study / Christian Formation, Sunday School for youth and children, youth group meetings, and childcare may resume, following the same guidelines as in-person worship. Deferred pastoral services, such as baptisms, may be held, and clergy are permitted to visit the dying and offer the sacraments, assuming in both cases that health and safety protocols are followed to the fullest extent. Churches may allow for some in-person fellowship meals, so long as they take place outside with 6-feet distances and other protocols in place.

Phase 2(c): Lifting Restrictions on Congregational Life (April 22 – May 17, 2021)

The Church Responds: Cleaning surfaces between services is no longer required; masks are optional for outdoor, socially distanced gatherings; fully vaccinated staff and volunteers are not required to quarantine after an exposure; and masks are optional for fully vaccinated staff members or participants in closed meetings, of 12 or less, while indoors. All church services, fellowship gatherings, and faith formation / education classes are considered open to the public.

Phase 2(d): New Options for Vaccinated Individuals (May 18, 2021 – Current Phase)

The Church Responds: All previous requirements (masks, distancing, etc.) remain for unvaccinated people and children under 12. For fully vaccinated people, masks and social distancing is optional for all gatherings, whether public or private. Childcare requirements remain in place, regardless of staff/volunteers' vaccination status. Clergy and Vestries/Bishop's Committees have full authority to make decisions based on local congregation and COVID-19 situation. Church leadership may choose to do more than the Guidelines require.

Phase 3: A Full Return

Health Characteristics: Negative community spread. Mass vaccination and therapeutic availability. Mass testing for virus and immunity. No social distancing requirements. Global vaccination.

The Church Responds: All restrictions on in-person worship, formation, meetings, community ministries, and gathering lifted. Online worship and meetings are still offered.

Phase 4: A Time for Reflection

The COVID-19 pandemic will forever change us in ways we may not fully know or understand for a long time. The church is finding new ways to adapt, to reach out, and to serve as well as experiencing much fear and loss. Together the clergy and people of the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas will discern ways to reflect on how we've changed, what we've learned about ourselves and about the God we serve, and how we can bring our experiences as individual Christians, as congregations, and as a Diocese into the future and share what we've learned with the world.

Note: People are considered fully vaccinated:

- 2 weeks after their second dose in a 2-dose series, such as the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines, or
- 2 weeks after a single-dose vaccine, such as Johnson & Johnson's Janssen vaccine

If an individual doesn't meet these requirements, they are NOT fully vaccinated.

DIOCESAN GUIDANCE – PHASE 2(D)

a. Recommendations for Facilities

Clean and disinfect any regularly touched surfaces on a consistent, weekly schedule (ex. doorknobs, tables, chairs, and restroom facilities). Disinfecting seats, pews, and other service items is optional.

Cleaning surfaces between every service is no longer required, but encouraged. This should permit use of altar rail, when six feet social distancing can be maintained between households, as well as prayer books, hymnals, etc.

Make hand sanitizer, disinfecting wipes, soap and water, or similar disinfectants readily available.

Place easily visible signs explaining hygiene best practices (use bilingual signs and/or signs for young children, as needed).

Communication: Send all revised church protocols to church communication lists before they go into effect to let people know what to expect at in-person services and meetings.

Post printed copies of church protocols in an easily viewable locations, inside all open facilities.

Consider including a bulletin insert summarizing current church protocols and explain new updates or changes out loud at the start of each service.

b. Recommendations for Employees and Volunteers

A fully vaccinated* employee or volunteer who has symptoms that could be COVID-19, listed below, should be clinically evaluated and tested for SARS-CoV-2, and quarantine for 10 days if a positive test is returned.

Cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, chills, repeated shaking with chills, muscle pain, headache, sore throat, loss of taste or smell, diarrhea, feeling feverish or a measured temperature greater than or equal to 100.0 degrees Fahrenheit, known close contact with a person who is lab-confirmed to have COVID-19.

A fully vaccinated* employee or volunteer with a known close contact with someone diagnosed with COVID-19, is not required to self-quarantine or receive a negative COVID-19 in order to return to work.

For an employee or volunteer who is **not fully vaccinated*** and has symptoms that could be COVID-19, listed above, or known close contact with someone diagnosed with COVID-19, send them home and prevent from returning to work until the following criteria are met:

For an employee or volunteer diagnosed with COVID-19: the individual may return to work when all three of the following criteria are met: at least three days (72 hours) have passed since recovery (resolution of fever without the use of fever-reducing medications); respiratory symptoms improve (e.g., cough, shortness of breath); and at least 10 days have passed since symptoms first appeared;

For an employee or volunteer who has symptoms that could be COVID-19, or known close contact with someone diagnosed with COVID-19, and wants to return to work before completing the above self-isolation period: the individual must present proof of a negative COVID-19 test, dated after the potential exposure or first symptoms, or obtain a medical professional's note clearing the individual for return based on an alternative diagnosis;

For an employee or volunteer who is not fully vaccinated and has symptoms that could be COVID-19, but **does not get tested for COVID-19 or evaluated** by a medical professional: the individual cannot return to work until they meet the same three-step criteria listed above.

c. Recommendations for Worship Services and Other Gatherings

Worship services under these guidelines include Holy Eucharist, Morning and Evening Prayer (with or without Eucharist), and Healing services held inside or outside the church building; services on any day of the week are under these guidelines. Pastoral visits to the sick or dying are under these guidelines.

Clergy and Vestries/Bishop's Committees have full authority to make decisions based on their local congregation and COVID-19 situation. Church leadership may choose to do more than the Guidelines require, but they may not do less.

Masks

Masks are optional, but recommended for fully vaccinated* people, and expected and strongly encouraged for anyone who is not fully vaccinated inside the church sanctuary, facilities, and office buildings and at outdoor gatherings.

Congregations should prepare to give masks to attendees who need one.

Masks are required for childcare workers and volunteers, regardless of vaccination status.

Masks are required for clergy and Lay Eucharistic Ministers during the distribution of communion, regardless of vaccination status.

All clergy are not required to wear masks or gloves during the Eucharistic prayer, preaching, and reading.

All lay worship leaders are not required to wear masks while speaking or reading to the congregation, *as long as six feet social distancing can be maintained.*

Sunday Services and Weekday Services

Train all employees and ushers/greeters not to shake hands or embrace attendees wearing masks and to ask before approaching unmasked participants.

Churches may increase the number of available seats at each service to full capacity, or less if preferred, depending on local context and sanctuary/worship space lay out. Physical distancing is optional for fully vaccinated participants, and strongly recommended for anyone who is not vaccinated.

Keep in mind that some households will need to maintain a six-foot separation from others; consider ways that employees and ushers/greeters might help these families find seating to accommodate this request.

Processions are allowed, and six-feet between individuals is optional.

Dismissing people pew by pew is no longer needed; care should be taken to avoid crowded indoor lines and to maintain six-feet between households.

Choirs & Singing

Clergy and choir directors should carefully consider the spacing of singers, who should be significantly more than six feet apart and not facing one another, 'in the round', in addition to the additional risks inherent in choir rehearsals. Well-fitting masks are strongly encouraged for musicians and members of the choir, even while singing.

Masks are required for choirs singing in procession.

Congregational singing is allowed. Individuals planning worship services should give much attention to whether and how to include congregational singing in modified worship services.

Communion

As soon as Trinity Sunday, May 30, communion may be offered in both kinds, with wine **by intinction only**, using one or more chalices to administer wine to communicants. The use of the common cup to administer Communion is still not permitted.

Before worship or during announcements, the clergy should announce that those desiring Communion may still choose to receive Communion in one kind only, and that receiving the bread only is considered full Communion. The Book of Common Prayer refers to Spiritual Communion in the form for Ministration to the Sick, directing the priest to assure a person unable to eat and drink the bread and wine “that all the benefits of Communion are received even though the Sacrament is not received with the mouth” (*Book of Common Prayer, page 457*).

Preparation (One Kind and Intinction)

Clergy, Lay Eucharistic Ministers, Lay Eucharistic Visitors, and anyone assisting in the distribution of the sacrament must wash hands for 20 seconds or use hand sanitizer immediately prior to the distribution of the elements.

Altar guilds should follow all sanitary protocols for vessels and items used during services.

Consecration and Distribution (One Kind and Intinction)

The priest presiding at the altar during the Eucharistic Prayer is not required to wear a mask. However, the bread, and wine, should be covered during consecration, and only the priest’s host is touched.

Clergy and Eucharistic Ministers are required to wear a face mask *during distribution*, covering nose, mouth, and chin. Gloves are optional.

Masks are optional for communicants who are fully vaccinated; masks are required for any communicant who is not fully vaccinated, but may be removed briefly to consume the bread.

Diligently avoid hand-to-hand contact when distributing a communion wafer by dropping the wafer into the hands of the recipient.

Train ushers to help recipients maintain six feet of distance between households while walking to the front for communion and at the altar rail, if applicable.

Intinction

Encourage communicants to sanitize hands prior to receiving communion. *Consider sanitizer placement and allow time for the sanitizer to dry.*

Permitted intinction methods include:

Clergy or Eucharistic Minister dips the wafer into the chalice and places it into communicant’s hand.

Communicant receives wafer and dips it into the chalice on their own.

Clergy should wait to drink from the chalice until after everyone has received Communion, if that is their practice. If clergy will receive by intinction, they may do so directly following the Invitation.

Good practices to consider include:

Using small home communion chalices or chalices with a smaller mouth, more like a wine glass.

Pouring only a small amount of consecrated wine in the chalice, so that the wafer touches the bottom before any fingers touch the wine. *Less wine is needed for intinction than for the Common Cup.*

Details to consider before introducing communion in both kinds by intinction include:

How have communicants been receiving Communion during the pandemic - Coming forward to the altar rail? Coming forward in a line? Staying in their pews? How will adding intinction change the movement of worshipers?

Under Special Circumstances

Clergy and Lay Eucharistic Visitors may offer in-person communion to individuals or households outside of a public worship service, from reserved sacrament per the rubric for Communion Under Special Circumstances, pp. 396-399 in the Book of Common Prayer. This may take place before a congregation resumes modified in-person worship services and continues to be an option for individuals or families after in-person services begin again.

Other Services (Baptisms, Weddings, Funerals, etc.)

Weddings and funerals, including graveside services, are permitted.

Wedding coordinators and guests must abide by your church's protocols.

Coordinate with funeral homes to maintain their protocols as well as yours.

The same social distancing, sanitizing, worship service protocols, precautions, and guidelines must be used for these services as a Sunday Worship Service.

Baptisms may resume, following protocols for in-person worship. Though baptisms are intended to take place within the context of Sunday worship, the Prayer Book rubrics allow for baptisms in other circumstances.

Healing services are permitted, following local protocols for in-person worship. Clergy are permitted to visit the dying and offer the sacraments, assuming health and safety protocols are followed to the fullest extent.

Vestry and Bishop's Committee Meetings

Vestries and Bishop's Committees may resume in-person meetings, following all protocols for gatherings outlined in the Guidelines for Reopening. Whenever possible, provision is to be made for members to participate remotely.

Annual Congregational Meeting

Vestries may not cancel the Annual Meeting; however, each church has discretion in how to organize and conduct its meeting. The Vestry/Bishop's Committee should consider all details and options thoroughly, checking the church by-laws if applicable. If established rules of order, or even customary practices, need to be set aside, the Vestry should pass a resolution making a one-year exception, and then clearly communicate the new process to the congregation well in advance of the meeting.

Voting: Vestry members whose terms expire in 2020 cannot extend their term for another year. Most reports and the 2021 budget can be presented electronically or copies made available, but the process for nominating and electing new Vestry members, and Council Delegates if they're elected at the Annual Meeting, will take careful consideration.

Voting shall remain anonymous, so no “show of hands” or voice votes.

If the number of nominees is the same as the number of vacancies, the group may be elected “by acclamation.”

Outreach Ministries

Outreach ministries may resume fully, following local protocols for in-person gatherings. AA and other 12-step groups; other support groups; and ministries related to social services such as mental health and feeding the hungry, may return to church facilities, with the permission of the Rector/Vicar and Vestry/Bishop’s Committee.

Episcopal Schools

Episcopal Schools may choose to resume in-person instruction at the discretion of the Head of School and Board, with the input of the Church Vestry or Bishop’s Committee regarding the reopening date.

Outside Groups

Outside groups may be allowed to resume in-person gatherings at the church at the discretion of the clergy and Vestry/Bishop’s Committee and following the local church protocols.

Churches are responsible for communicating the Diocesan Guidelines and local church protocols to the group leader and should emphasize the necessity of notifying the church immediately regarding any confirmed cases identified within the group.

Other Types of In-Person Gatherings

Clergy and lay leadership may choose to begin some in-person gatherings, even if the church has not yet begun in-person worship. All in-person meetings or gatherings at the church should follow protocols outlined in the Guidelines for Reopening.

Formation Classes

In-person gatherings for Adult Bible study / Christian Formation, Sunday School for youth and children, and youth group meetings may resume, following protocols outlined in the Guidelines for Reopening.

Masks are required for staff and lay volunteers who interact with children and youth under the age of 12, regardless of vaccination status.

Childcare and Nurseries

Childcare services may resume, following rigorous health and sanitation protocols.

Sanitation

Require frequent staff handwashing (upon entering the classroom, before and after handling food or drinks, diaper changes and assisting children with the potty, etc.).

Have children wash hands (or if over 2 use hand sanitizer) when entering the classroom, after a sneeze or cough, before and after eating and after using the bathroom.

Remove any soft toys that are hard to clean from your nursery space.

After a child has worked with a toy put it in a designated spot to clean before replacing on the shelves.

Clean high-touch surfaces often and do a complete cleaning of all surfaces and used toys at the end of each nursery timeframe.

If possible have parents bring any snacks or drinks children will need during their time in the nursery. If providing food or drinks use disposable containers.

Personal Protective Equipment

Require nursery staff to wear masks at all times, regardless of staff member's vaccination status.

Suggest nursery staff wear an outer layer top, i.e. nursery t-shirt, medical scrubs, apron, etc., that can be swapped out if secretions get on it.

Encourage children ages 3 years and older to wear a mask while in the nursery.

Social Distancing

Limit childcare capacity to allow for social distancing based on your space. This may require parents to register online or by phone ahead of time. Consider advertising 1-2 spots below actual capacity to allow for visitors advertise.

If possible, keep windows open to increase airflow.

Increase the distance to 6 feet between children during table work and while eating.

Symptom Screening

Screen staff for any symptoms of COVID-19 upon arrival. Any staff with symptoms or a fever over 100.0 degrees should be sent home.

Screen children by taking their temperature at the door and asking parents if they have had any COVID-19 symptoms in the past 24 hours. Any child with symptoms or a fever of 100 degrees or more should not be allowed in the nursery.

Train staff on what symptoms to look for and what to do if a child comes in sick or develops symptoms while in care.

If a child develops COVID-19 symptoms isolate them if possible and contact their parents or caregivers to pick them up as soon as possible.

Children or staff who have been exposed to COVID-19 or show symptoms should not be allowed to return to the nursery until CDC guidelines for quarantine have been met.

If your staff member has been fully vaccinated (2 weeks after final dose) they are not required to quarantine for an exposure to COVID-19 unless they show symptoms.

Responding to a lab-confirmed COVID-19 case

Inform nursery parents, but do not give the name of the child or adult.

Close off areas used by the sick person and wait 24 hours before cleaning and disinfecting.

Open outside windows if possible.

Clean and disinfect all areas used by the person who is sick, such as classroom, bathroom, and common areas.

These recommendations are based on [CDC guidelines for childcare centers](#) and the nursery policies of St. Luke's, San Antonio and St. Peter's Kerrville.

Fellowship/Coffee Hour

Informal fellowship gatherings, such as coffee hours or luncheons, may return indoors.

Masks are required for anyone serving food or drink during distribution, whether inside or outdoors and regardless of vaccination status. Servers should wash their hands properly before serving; gloves are optional. Diligently avoid hand-to-hand contact, and help maintain six feet of distance between households waiting to get refreshments

Maintaining six-feet distances between households, during indoor/outdoor fellowship, is recommended but not required for fully vaccinated people.

When food is present, consider taking the following steps to minimize person-to-person contact:

Designate a few people to serve food.

Provide and encourage hand sanitizer before anyone uses shared serving utensils at “buffet style” meals or drink stations.

Consider pre-pouring drinks into cups. Provide sweetener, creamer, or other drink “fixings” in single-serve packets or cups, and provide individual stirring utensils. For hot beverages, such as coffee, consider designating a person to pour cups of coffee or hot water for tea, from the carafe as requested.

Gathering for an outdoor, picnic-style meal, where people bring food, drinks, and utensils for their household alone, is permitted, using the same physical distancing and mask guidelines listed above. If the church provides seating, consider positioning chairs and/or tables to accommodate six-feet distances between households.

d. Protocols for Responding to COVID-19 within a Congregation

Regardless of vaccination status, contact tracing is still important to help inform individual decisions and preventative measures. If a priest, church staff member, volunteer, or in-person attendee has a lab-confirmed COVID-19 case, or has been in close contact with someone who tests positive, then

Gather information from the individual, including

Who they may have come into close contact with at church,
What rooms/areas they entered,
Whether they grant the church permission to release their name,
The date of their test (not the date results were received),
Whether they are experiencing symptoms,
Whether they observed guidelines while on site (wearing a mask, hand washing, physical distancing, etc.)

Communicate this information with the congregation and other onsite groups

Move quickly – if someone was in close contact with this person, then it is imperative they are notified in a timely fashion so they can assess their risk, begin to self-quarantine, if necessary, and monitor for symptoms.

Be respectful - you may not share the individual's name in communication or conversation without their permission. Be mindful of other identifying factors that might reveal the identity of someone who has requested anonymity.

Share important details – including the date and time the person was at church, and what areas they did or did not enter.

Repeat the church guidelines – emphasize their importance and the reasons behind them.

Do not offer medical advice to church staff or volunteers. Individuals who have been in the church or office since the announcement, or who were in close contact with the person, will have questions about getting tested themselves; questions about their own health concerns should be directed to their healthcare providers.

Determine whether in-person worship services and other gatherings should be paused to allow for additional sanitization or for clergy and lay leadership to self-quarantine.

COVID-19 is primarily spread through “close contact” with a person carrying the disease. Factors to consider when assessing a possible exposure include proximity to the person and the length of the exposure (a longer exposure equals a higher risk). The CDC defines “close contact” as being within about six feet. Prolonged exposure is loosely defined as longer than fifteen minutes. All details of the encounter should be considered in the congregational and individual response.

For example, brief interactions are less likely to result in transmission; however, symptoms and the type of interaction (e.g., did the infected person cough directly into the face of the exposed individual) remain important.

See the Protocols for Employees and Volunteers above for a detailed, guided response to employees or volunteers with a confirmed case.

RESOURCES AND INFORMATION FOR A FAITH-BASED RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Tracking COVID-19 and Vaccination Rates within the State of Texas and by County

- Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) - <https://dshs.texas.gov/coronavirus>
- [UT Health School of Public Health COVID-19 Dashboard](#)
- Texas Association of Counties - <https://www.county.org/>
- COVID-19 Direct - <https://covid-19.direct/state/TX>
- City of San Antonio & Bexar County - <https://covid19.sanantonio.gov>

Public Health Information and Resources

- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) – <https://cdc.gov/coronavirus>
 - [CDC Communications Resources](#) - the CDC resources include a variety of articles, downloadable guides, and handouts, **available in English and Spanish**, to help prevent the spread of disease and of misinformation.
 - [Use of Cloth Face Coverings to Help Slow the Spread of COVID-19](#)
 - [Considerations for Communities of Faith](#)
 - [Cleaning and Disinfecting: Plan, Prepare, Respond](#)
 - [Guidance for Operating Child Care Programs during COVID-19](#)
 - [When You've Been Fully Vaccinated](#)
- [Coronavirus: Safety Tips for Religious Organizations](#) - a Risk Management Tip Sheet published by Church Pension Group (CPG)

Resources from The Episcopal Church and the Diocese

- [Faith-Based Response to Infectious Disease](#) - scientific information, print resources, recorded webinars, and liturgical resources to support church leaders and congregations from Episcopal Relief and Development
- [Concerning COVID-19](#) – resources, video recordings, and reflections from Presiding Bishop Michael Curry and The Episcopal Church
- [COVID-19 Resources](#) - General information, updates, and resources from the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas

APPENDIX A: FORMS



Current as of May 18, 2021

Covenant for the Phased Reopening of Churches within the Diocese

Church name: _____ City/town name: _____

We, the elected or appointed leaders of our church, together with our rector or vicar, if there be one, have read and discussed carefully the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas Guidelines regarding the phased reopening of churches and church offices within the Diocese.

We understand that the duration and spread of COVID-19 is still not fully known, and that it is possible that the reopening of our church may be delayed or halted by a resurgence in confirmed cases. We further understand that we cannot eliminate risk when we reopen our church, but must seek to minimize that risk as much as possible.

We agree to abide by the Guidelines and to implement their requirements for the benefit of our congregation and our local community.

As part of our implementation of the Diocesan Guidelines, we will:

- continue to monitor pandemic updates closely and seek the guidance of public health and medical professionals in our community
- develop written protocols for phasing in in-person worship and, the reopening of our church office, if applicable
- determine “maximum occupancy” for worship services
- arrange thorough cleanings of church spaces by volunteers or staff **before** and **after** worship services
- communicate the diocesan Guidelines and our own church protocols to all parishioners before reopening and make printed copies of Guidelines and church protocols available on site
- communicate regularly the ongoing risks of COVID-19, particularly to older members and to those with pre-existing medical conditions
- communicate the importance of staying home when sick or not feeling well to all church members and staff
- offer recorded or live-streamed options for worship services and formation, for persons who should, or choose to, stay home; if your congregation is unable to host online services, contact communications@dwtx.org for assistance.

We understand that permission to begin in-person worship during Phase 2 does not allow for further easing of the Guidelines until the Bishop determines that the Diocese can proceed to the next phase.

We agree to contact the Bishop’s office without hesitation should questions or issues arise regarding the Guidelines or our local Church protocols.

Signature of Rector/Vicar/Priest-in-Charge

Signature of Vestry/Bishop’s Committee Officer

Printed Name & Title

Printed Name & Title

Approved on _____ (date) at a meeting of the Vestry/Bishop’s Committee. Send completed and signed form to the Rev. Mike Besson, Archdeacon, at mike.besson@dwtx.org.

REQUEST FOR APPORTIONMENT CANCELLATION FORM

Date: _____

Church: _____

City: _____

We are asking the Bishop Reed; Ted Burkhart, Treasurer; Susan Hardaway, Chief Financial Officer, and Canon Caroline Mowen to review the attached documents and consider the cancellation of the

_____ apportionment for our church.
(Month)

Documents / Information required:

- YTD Budget (by month) through month (May, June, July, August) requesting cancellation
- YTD Revenues (by month) through month (May, June, July, August) requesting cancellation
 - identify PPP on separate line/account
- YTD Expenses (by month) through month (May, June, July, August) requesting cancellation
- YTD Pledges (by month) through month (May, June, July, August) requesting cancellation (pledged and paid amounts)
- Percentage of pledge payments received electronically

We are asking for the cancelling of \$ _____.

Rector/Vicar Signature

Sr./Bishop's Warden Signature

Treasurer Signature

EVALUATION FOR APPORTIONMENT CANCELLATION - MAY, JUNE, JULY, AUGUST 2020

Required documents for evaluation:

- YTD Budget (by month) through month (May, June, July, August) requesting cancellation
- YTD Revenues (by month) through month (May, June, July, August) requesting cancellation
 - identify PPP on separate line/account
- YTD Expenses (by month) through month (May, June, July, August) requesting cancellation
- YTD Pledges (by month) through month (May, June, July, August) requesting cancellation (pledged and paid amounts)
- Percentage of pledge payments received electronically
- Statement of the amount of May's (or other month's) Apportionment asking to be cancelled; signed by the Rector/Vicar, Sr./Bishop's Warden, Treasurer

NOTE: Each month's apportionment cancellation consideration will be evaluated separately, with the church providing the required documents through the month requested.

Evaluation Process:

1. Review revenues compared to budget and confirm the church has been negatively impacted by the epidemic.
2. Confirm the church has a working budget.
3. Confirm the church did a Stewardship program in 2019 for 2020 Budget.
4. Confirm the church has on-line giving options set-up.
5. Confirm apportionment payments for January – March 2020 have been made, or a plan for payment has been worked out with the diocesan Treasurer.

APPENDIX B: QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER WITH CHURCH LEADERSHIP

While planning phased reopening plans for worship services, discuss:

Is our worship space large enough to accommodate social distancing if the “regular crowd” shows up? If not, do we have an alternative, “overflow” space to offer (parish hall, chairs 6 feet apart, etc.)?

How many people can we accommodate safely in our worship space with proper social distancing? How will we communicate this adjusted capacity with attendees, and what will we do if that number is exceeded?

For congregations with large numbers of people, small spaces, or both: could we create an attendance schedule where people can sign up to attend one or two Sunday services each month? This would allow families to take turns and could help ensure that everyone has the opportunity to worship in your space 1-2 times a month.

Is outdoor worship possible in our community? Can this allow for more people to participate and lessen the work of sanitizing the space? What happens if the weather turns bad suddenly on a Sunday morning?

Can we gather sufficient volunteers or staff to sanitize our space before, in between, and after services? Can our congregation sustain this cleaning team for the “long haul”? Are there adequate cleaning supplies available to us or are they still hard to get?

How and when will we conduct training for ushers, servers, altar guild, etc. to ensure they understand and follow the guidelines, and can answer questions if asked?

What local indicators and reports will we use to decide whether to return to modified in-person worship or to return to online-only, physically-distanced services? How will our congregation handle this decision-making process?

How will our congregation respond and communicate about a confirmed case within our staff, volunteer leaders, or members? What scenarios (e.g. a church staff member tests positive, a worship leader has been in close contact with someone with a confirmed case, a member experiences covid-like symptoms shortly after attending in-person worship, etc.) will lead us to consider suspending in-person worship and gatherings, and for how long?

While planning the Annual Meeting for a congregation, discuss:

What is the capacity for physical distancing in your parish hall or nave? Is there room to include the number of people who will likely attend the Annual Meeting? Do you need to require reservations ahead of time?

Can parishioners vote for Vestry/Bishop’s Committee members or Council Delegates by other methods than in-person, paper ballots? If the meeting is held online, how will votes be cast?

While planning phased reopening plans for other in-person gatherings for formation and fellowship, discuss:

What in-person gatherings would be considered highest priority and what can wait? How many of our parishioners are in categories of increased vulnerability?

How many people can we gather in the nave for worship, or in other church facilities, following the guidelines? What options do we have for outdoor worship and other gatherings?

Can our church maintain adequate sanitation in a timely manner for each gathering and each type of gathering?

Has our city/county issued directives/recommendations limiting the size of gatherings or advising that people stay home?

Local church leadership should consider all of the following indicators as part of any decision regarding in-person offerings:

Positivity rate: the percentage of positive cases, comparing the number of new confirmed COVID-19 test cases to the total new test results

Doubling rate: the number of days it will take for the number of confirmed cases to double; a smaller doubling rate predicts a faster spread

Hospitalizations: the daily count of patients admitted to hospitals for COVID-19, number of available beds, as well as numbers of patients in Intensive Care Units (ICU) and on ventilators.

Testing Capacity for your county or city

Vaccine Data: Monitor county and state-wide percentages of people 16+ who are fully vaccinated.

Local church leadership should consider all potential scenarios, including what to do when a staff member, volunteer, or service participant is confirmed to have COVID-19 or comes in close contact with someone who tests positive. See page 5 of the Guidelines.

APPENDIX C: COLLECTION OF DIOCESAN COMMUNICATIONS REGARDING COVID-19 RESPONSE

All Communications Available Online at www.dwtx.org/covid19

How to Update Service Times and Contact Information on the Episcopal Asset Map

A Reminder to Church Office Staff from the Diocesan Communications Department & The Episcopal Church's Office of Communication

March 23, 2020

In response to nationwide requests to share information about livestream service times, The Episcopal Church's Office of Communication has updated the worship category of the [Episcopal Asset Map](#) to include services via livestream, in addition to the diocesan list posted on the [COVID-19 Resources page](#).

Churches who will livestream services can submit updated worship information to the diocesan map administrator today, following the steps listed below. Please list what services you will livestream, whether those offerings are regular, semi-regular, or occasional services, and in what language they will be offered.

If your church or clergy contact information needs to be updated, please submit the new information through Asset Map editor, steps listed below.

Since all updates to churches and schools must be approved by the diocesan map administrator prior to publication, you do not need a username or password to submit edits to your church's listing on the Episcopal Asset Map.

How To Update Church Information on the Episcopal Asset Map

[Click here](#) to watch a playlist of seven short videos to help you understand and update each section of your congregation's listing on the Episcopal Asset Map.

Find your church:

1. Visit www.episcopalassetmap.org and search for your church by name or by city.
2. Select your church's pin, then click on the name or "More Details" link in the box on the right.
3. On the place page, click "Update this place"
4. Select the Worship tab, on the left side of the page, then add a new service or edit an existing one.

Add a Livestream Note to an Existing Worship Service:

1. Select the Worship tab, on the left side of the page and click the "Edit" button for the individual service.
2. In the Worship Language menu, type and select "live stream".
3. Type a description in the Worship Style text box that includes what the service is called and how it can be accessed.

For example: "Morning Prayer will be offered on our Facebook page Sundays at 10:30 a.m., at www.facebook.com/StPhilipsChurchUvalde"; or "Follow us on Facebook to get a notification when we go live for Sunday services of Morning Prayer @StPhilipsChurchUvalde. Note: You do not have to be on Facebook to watch this live service."

Create a New Worship Service Entry:

1. Select the Worship tab, on the left side of the page and click “Add Worship Times” button.
2. In the resulting box, enter the day of the week the service occurs.
3. If it is an occasional or semi-regular offering, select “Does not repeat weekly” and in the following box, enter what information you know (Occasional; third Sunday of each month; alternating Mondays, etc.).
4. Enter the time of the service.
5. In the language box, type first the spoken languages in which worship is offered. Then type “live stream”.
6. Describe in the "Worship Style" text box what the service is called and how it can be accessed

For example: "Morning Prayer will be offered on our Facebook page Sundays at 9:00 a.m. en Español, at www.facebook.com/ChristChurchEpiscopalLaredo"; or "Follow us on Facebook to get a notification when we go live for Sunday services of Morning Prayer @ChristChurchEpiscopalLaredo. Note: You do not have to be on Facebook to watch this live service."

Please note: You should not click "Save and Submit" until you have completed all edits to your church listing.

Update Church & Clergy Contact Information:

1. Select the Contact Information tab, on the left side of the page.
2. If creating a new contact person, click the "Add Person" and enter their name, title, and contact information.
3. If updating an existing person, click the "Edit" button next to their name.
4. To remove someone, click the three red dots and select "Remove".

Once you have completed all edits to your church listing, click "Save and Submit" at the bottom of the page. You'll be asked to provide your name and email address, just in case the diocesan map administrator needs to contact you about the change you submitted. Then click “Save and Submit” again.

The Episcopal Church Office of Communications is working to take information gleaned from the Asset Map and publish it to the Digital Church Guide. Being clear about what services will be livestreamed, and when, will help us communicate this further and better to Episcopalians and others looking for a worshipping community.

Questions? Please email the Diocesan Communications Department at communications@dwtx.org.

Guidelines for the Phased Reopening of Churches in West Texas – Introduction by Bishop Reed

May 1, 2020

Dear Clergy and People of West Texas,

We have traveled a long, strange road during the COVID-19 pandemic, and our journey is not over yet. Personally, congregationally, and nationally, our lives have been changed in ways we will not fully understand for some time. Much of the strangeness of this journey, ironically, stems from our lack of physical movement, from our willingness to stay home and stay away, from our withdrawal from those networks of relationships so central to our lives, and last, but not least, from the suspension of in-person gatherings for worship, fellowship, and ministry.

Shortly after Ash Wednesday, life in the congregations in West Texas began to change, with the restriction on in-person worship and other gatherings put in place in mid-March. Though it's been less than two months, it feels like a lifetime ago.

We find ourselves at a threshold, one of several that lie ahead, where the course of the pandemic now allows us to begin planning to reopen churches and church offices. This reopening cannot be every program and all at once or one-size-fits-all. Our decisions and the types of gatherings we can consider will still depend on the incidence of the Coronavirus in our many communities and upon the best guidance of public health officials at all levels. Even as we begin to reopen, we must all prepare for further delays and the possibility that we may have to cease in-person worship again.

Though the State of Texas has lifted or eased many of its restrictions on social and economic life, please note that almost all safeguards are still strongly recommended—including physical distancing, hygiene and cleaning practices, and limiting gatherings.

From the start of our pandemic responses, diocesan leadership has sought to respond to the pandemic by keeping in mind three touchstones: do our best to take the next right step; love of neighbor; and distinguishing between what Christians can do and what we *should* do.

The Guidelines you are receiving reflect those three priorities. Before you read them, please keep in mind these underlying principles.

First, they are phased. We have not attempted to look way down the road. The Guidelines focus ***only*** on the planning and beginning stages of reopening churches and church offices. They do not address fellowship, formation classes, meetings, or day school operations. Current restrictions on those remain in place for now.

Second, they are shaped by our Lord's command to love God and love our neighbor as we love ourselves. The Guidelines strongly emphasize decisions to reflect this love in each congregation's planning and protocols. We can show this love in self-restraint and moderation, in patience and forbearance. We must take seriously the limitations placed on us by the pandemic, for the sake of all our neighbors, whether they are the person who will sit six feet down the pew from us or fellow citizens in our community.

Third, they call us to consider our policies and phased actions in light of our freedom in Christ, which is about what we **should** do for love of Christ, before it is about what we can do. Emergency orders and government policies are not the maximum standard for Christian behavior in this time; they are a starting point to build upon. We are called to take up our cross and follow, a call to love sacrificially. The bar is set far higher for those who seek to follow Jesus.

We are all weary of staying apart. We miss ‘normal’ and long to pick up our lives again. I get that fully. If you have ever wondered what your church could possibly have in common with a church hundreds of miles away, on the other side of the Diocese, know that almost everyone has rediscovered that worship matters to them, not theoretically but **really** and **deeply**. Being together as Christ’s Body matters. We all long to “go to the house of the Lord.”

We are almost there. But, not yet. We are still waiting for signs that the pandemic is ebbing across the Diocese. A 14-day decline in confirmed cases of COVID-19 is a primary indicator that public health and medical professionals are awaiting, and one that we are monitoring as well.

As we stand here at this threshold, looking towards the phased reopening of our churches, there is more work to be done. The work given to our clergy and lay leadership is to take to heart the diocesan Guidelines and to develop Church plans and protocols to implement the Guidelines in each local setting. **The diocesan Guidelines for Phased Reopening are not optional. Your church’s leadership may choose to do more than the Guidelines require, but they may not do less.** My staff and I will host a webinar for all clergy next week, to review these guidelines together and to address questions.

Clearly, we cannot *eliminate* risks when we regather. We will still be living in the midst of the pandemic. But we can do many things to reduce the risk. Indeed, by and large, we have been doing them for the past two months by physical distancing, methodical hand-washing, faithful mask-wearing, and serious cleaning of surfaces. Our reopening plans will need to be more detailed than that, of course, but our aim is to promote, and insist upon, public health practices that will reduce health risks and serve our communities and our nation by limiting the spread of COVID-19.

Reopening will be more complicated in some of our churches than in others, and I expect some congregations will be ready to reopen before others. The diocesan Guidelines will not solve every problem or address every situation. Nor will the plans and protocols developed by your church be able to speak to every aspect of this season. We will continue to learn. We will continue to make mistakes, and when we do, we will need to take a deep breath, give each other a break, and ask for and receive forgiveness. And then, we get up and start again.

Everywhere I look in the Diocese of West Texas, I see signs of hope and powerful reminders that although we are temporarily confined by the Coronavirus, we are not defined by it. It is the risen Christ who claims us and defines us. I see this Easter life in the countless ways that you have continued worship and ministry in the name of Christ and your determination to make that happen. I see it in the countless hours spent learning technologies, so that you can continue to be together in Christ while physically apart. I see it in the compassion and caring you show to so many whose suffering and anxiety in this time is greater than our own. I see it in the life-giving ways that you are facing our present circumstances with both clear-eyed realism and rock-solid hope.

We have traveled a long way during these past two months. We are not yet where we want to be. But that day is coming, and there is work for us to do to get ready. I look forward, more than I can say, to that day we can be together.

“Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive. And above all these, put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.”
(Colossians 3:12-15)

Love in the Risen Christ,
+David

David M. Reed
Bishop of West Texas

Introduction to Guidelines for Phased Reopening of Churches from Archdeacon Mike Besson

May 1, 2020

All our consideration of COVID-19 and our churches must begin with “thank you.” Thank you to each and every one of you who have worked so hard to carry on the life, worship and mission of the Church in the midst of this pandemic. Throughout the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas, clergy, lay leaders, and congregations as a whole have given themselves wholeheartedly to learning or improving ways to faithfully keep their churches connected in worship, study, outreach and pastoral care. In the midst of continual disruptions and uncertainties in your own lives, you have committed to being sources of encouragement and hope, sources of the Light of Christ to one another and to your communities.

This commitment has required a lively trust in the love of God and a steadfast commitment to persevere by grace. Rapidly changing circumstances have required us to adjust and adjust again. The tragic, worldwide effect of the pandemic has shaken us to the core. And then we find that the very place we turn to in times of trouble, our churches, must be closed down, for the sake of everyone. Our response, surely the work of the Holy Spirit, has been to redouble our efforts to love one another and stick together, even while physically distant. We have met and worshiped using social media platforms that we had never heard of two months ago. To get from where we were when we entered this strange world to the threshold of a phased reopening, and to arrive here together has required the very best from us: patience, trust, forgiveness, mercy, compassion, cooperation, and (not least) sacrificial love. The novel coronavirus did not arrive with a training manual or a pandemic road-map, and it is no weakness to say, as many of us have, that “we’re making this up as we go.”

And so, thank you. And thanks be to God for you and for your determination to be fully the Church. “The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness shall never overcome it.” (John 1:5)

The same traits and virtues that have brought us this far together will continue to be vitally important as we begin our movement toward a phased regathering for in-person worship. As the State of Texas begins to “open up” again, the Church in West Texas is called to plan our own reopening, based not on fear or on reckless wishful thinking, but on the call of Jesus to follow him and love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

All clergy and local church leaders seem to understand and agree that the reopening of the 87 churches of our Diocese must be gradual and carefully phased. There will be no flipping of a switch or grand announcement that we can all “go out and play.” It will not happen all at once, and it won’t look exactly the same in all our churches. This will feel unfair to some, but please keep in mind that we seek to take the next right step, as a Diocese and in each of our congregations, and to take that step in ways that honor Christ and reveal his love.

The image of “normal” that we may have in our minds and imaginations will probably look different from reality, at least for a while. It may be a long time before church looks and feels like it did before COVID-19. Even then, we may discover that COVID-19 has changed us in ways that we won’t realize until we are able to take a collective breath and reflect on what “post COVID-19” worship, life, and ministry looks like. Once that time comes, the people of the Diocese of West Texas should set aside intentional time to reflect on what we’ve learned about ourselves, our communities, our churches, and our God.

The Guidelines are intended to assist your church plan and facilitate its reopening, so that people may begin to return to the worship life they so deeply long for, in the safest way possible and mindful that risk remains.

Clergy and Vestries/Bishop's Committees in each congregation must give assent to these Guidelines before the Bishop will give permission to begin this next Phase. Vestries and Bishop's Committees may choose, given their local conditions, to make their plan more restrictive than these Guidelines, but may not make them less so. Implementation of the Guidelines will require much conversation and work, and that is being entrusted to the leadership of each church. The Guidelines cannot possibly answer every question or address every local issue. The intention is to provide a strong, clear structure that can be developed locally. Members of the Bishop's staff are available to assist churches in developing their local protocols in accordance with the Guidelines.

A final word of thanks. These Guidelines are the result of countless hours of meetings, study, discussion and debate, and all of it done in an environment that seems to change daily. Several members of the diocesan staff have labored long on the document. We have studied government pronouncements and public health reports and sat in on more webinars than is healthy. Our Chancellor and Standing Committee have reviewed this work carefully. A cross-section of our clergy were consulted, and we have received very helpful insights from clergy and laity across the Diocese. More broadly, our Bishop has been in regular conversation with the Presiding Bishop's office and with bishops throughout the United States since early March. He has also consulted closely with the Episcopal bishops of the dioceses in Texas, Province VII Episcopal bishops, and with ecumenical partners. We have all shared freely and there's been no pride of ownership. All of these collaborative efforts are reflected in the Guidelines.

There's a proverb of obscure origin that says, "If you want to arrive fast, go alone. If you want to arrive together, go slow." Our hearts' desire is that we will move carefully and deliberately, indeed, that we will walk in love as Christ loves us, so that we will arrive together on the other side of the pandemic. May these Guidelines serve us all in reaching that great day.

Current Situation and Expectations

Since mid-March, the Rt. Rev. David M. Reed has called the congregations of West Texas to refrain from in-person gatherings for worship and meetings. At present, the restrictions are in place through May 15; however, they may be extended further by the Bishop.

Clergy and Vestries/Bishop's Committees should begin conversations about phased reopening now.

The decision to allow the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas to resume modified in-person worship will come from the Rt. Rev. David M. Reed, in collaboration with guidance from the Standing Committee as well as state and local authorities. Once Bishop Reed has issued a public worship authorization, local congregations may choose to hold modified public worship or to remain in physically-distanced, online worship mode. While you are being invited to begin planning for a modified return to public worship, be reminded that just because you can, does not mean that you must. Clergy at higher risk of COVID-19 infection will not be expected by the bishop to lead public worship.

Modified public worship cannot begin until your congregation has submitted its signed covenant to Archdeacon Mike Besson, at mike.besson@dwtx.org, and after Bishop Reed announces that churches may begin ***implementing a phased reopening within the Guidelines.*** Following this, everyone should rigorously follow the practices specified in these guidelines to facilitate a safe and measured reopening for Texas.

Clergy and lay leaders must stay well-informed about local information, directives, and changes concerning COVID-19 in their communities and should be prepared to adapt their plans based on new information. Once public worship begins, the gatherings should be in compliance with local, state, national, and diocesan policies. Taking into consideration their local community, clergy and Vestries/Bishop's Committees may choose to be more restrictive than these guidelines, but not less. Each congregation will decide how to offer worship within these guidelines, using the checklist below to formulate a plan. There are some places in this document that conflict with lighter

restrictions published by the; our congregations will not be allowed to be less restrictive than the state and local ordinances or diocesan Guidelines. Clergy are not permitted to organize or lead worship away from church premises that is not in compliance with these Guidelines.

Even after a phased reopening begins, congregations should continue to offer online options for worship to accommodate families who should not or cannot attend in-person services. Discussions about public worship will take place with the following premise in mind: if we are out in public, we are at risk. During this phase, risk can only be minimized, not eliminated. Additionally, the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas will not approve a service only for the at-risk population, as we do not want to encourage our most at-risk people to gather in public. The at-risk population is anyone 65 years old or older, and anyone with chronic lung disease; moderate to severe asthma; chronic heart disease; severe obesity; diabetes; chronic kidney disease undergoing dialysis; liver disease; or weakened immune system.

Following the bishop's authorization, church offices may reopen at the rector/vicar's discretion. Offices can reopen only if all social distancing and sanitation guidelines can be followed in your office space. Employees and volunteers who wish to continue to work from home/shelter in place must be allowed to do so. In congregations with no rector or vicar, the Senior Warden or Bishop's Warden will make the decision to reopen the office.

Future resurgences of COVID-19 cases may result in Bishop Reed requiring churches to return to physical distancing restrictions and no in-person worship. Church leaders should share this reality with congregation members and prepare their community emotionally and practically to return to physical distancing restrictions and no in-person worship, at any time. On the other hand, when confirmed cases begin to decline and as other public health milestones are met, the diocese will send updated guidelines for the next phases for reopening the Diocese at that time. More details about the four phases established by the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas for church reopening is included below.

DWTX Partners with Ben E. Keith for Church Cleaning Supplies

Interested churches may place orders through diocesan office

By Canon Caroline Mowen, Canon for Administration and Ministry Support

May 13, 2020

The Episcopal Diocese of West Texas is pleased to announce that diocesan churches and schools may order cleaning supplies and hygiene items in bulk through Ben E. Keith, long-time Camps & Conferences supplier. ...

Interested churches may place their order by completing the Order Form (available at dwtx.org/covid19) and submitting it to Canon Caroline Mowen, Canon for Administration and Ministry Support, at caroline.mowen@dwtx.org. The form will include the following information:

Church Name & City

Preferred Warehouse Location (Selma; Corpus Christi; La Feria)

Name of the Person Picking Up the Order

Items, with quantities (must be purchased by case/package)

The diocesan office will invoice churches for orders made through its account. Supplies must be purchased by the case or package, and orders placed before 4:00 p.m. would be available for pick up the following business day from the selected Ben E. Keith warehouse.

Only Ben E. Keith employees are allowed on site at each warehouse, but they will meet you at the gate with your order. Specific details for each location are listed below.

- San Antonio region (17635 Ben E. Keith Way; Selma, TX 78154): call 210-661-7997; warehouse is open Monday through Friday, from 8:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. for pick-up.
- Coastal Bend region (1621 Mussett Street; Corpus Christi, TX 78401): call Artie, at 361-814-3838 or Gabe, at 361-879-5734 for pick-up details.
- Rio Grande Valley region (1600 Rabb Road; La Feria, TX 78559): call Tony, at 956-592-3530, to make an appointment for pick-up.

At this time, there are no limits on the quantities a church may order. This offer will be available to churches for as long as necessary, and the list will be updated as additional products become available.

The Next Right Step: Regarding Phased the Phased Reopening of Diocesan Churches for Worship Services

By the Rt. Rev. David M. Reed

May 21, 2020

“And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy.” (Ezra 3:11-12)

Dear Friends in Christ,

We need to understand that it will not be the same. As churches across the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas prepare their phased reopening plans for modified public worship, we need to know that the services we will be returning to will be less, *for a season*, than what we remember and have been longing for. We will be like the Israelites returning after a long exile and beginning to rebuild the Temple - it will bring us joy, and at the same time, we will also feel disappointed that it is not the same.

Returning to worship in our local house of the Lord will be a great and joyful day, but it also signals another challenging phase in this difficult COVID-19 journey. We will need to rely on all of the hard work, planning, collaboration, patience, and forbearance that has carried us to this point together as we begin to regather in person to rebuild the life, worship, and ministries of our beloved churches. We begin this next phase weary from the work of the last three months and still anxious about the uncertainties ahead. We will need to pray for renewal and refreshment in the Spirit and for a rekindled commitment to love one another.

During this disruption, we have rightly remained focused on the mechanics of being Church while physically separated. Now, we need to consider carefully the powerful spiritual and emotional undercurrents moving within each of us and within our church families as we all plan the next right steps. What follows are updates, clarifications, and emphases as you and your congregation plan to restart in-person public worship. As with so much else, all that follows remains subject to change, based on the pandemic, and local and state orders and guidance.

Updates & Clarifications for Church Planning

- **This Sunday, May 24, remains the date after which churches may choose to begin their phased reopening** for in-person worship and church offices. As the state of Texas moves quickly to reopen, further extension of our diocesan-wide closure no longer contributes to a state-wide effort to slow the spread and flatten the curve. In addition, allowing this date to become a continually moving target adds another layer of uncertainty to these already uncertain and anxious times. For these and other reasons, and in close consultation with the Standing Committee, staff and other bishops, I have decided to maintain this date as the end of the current diocesan-wide restrictions on in-person worship services.
- **The Diocesan Guidelines for the Phased Reopening of Churches remain in effect.** No church may begin in-person worship until the church's leadership has **returned the signed Covenant** agreeing to implement the Guidelines, developed a local plan for

implementation, and communicated that plan in detail to their members. **Plans for implementing the Covenant** locally are also requested so that diocesan staff might review them.

- **Rectors/Vicars and Vestries/Bishop's Committees are entrusted with the timing for reopening.** While churches may begin to reopen after May 24, assuming the above conditions have been met, they are *not required* to do so.
- **A consistent, fourteen-day decline in confirmed cases remains an important marker for consideration by church leaders,** based on the guidance of health professionals and emphasized by the Diocese since mid-March. Following the increased availability of testing, which leads to increasing numbers of known cases, church leaders should also pay careful attention to the percentage of positive test results compared to total tests, or "positivity rate."
- **Church leaders are expected to stay informed about local trends, including confirmed cases and positivity rates,** and to consult local medical and public health officials regarding advisability of phased reopening. Clergy and lay leaders should be prepared, and prepare their congregations, to further restrict or suspend their reopening, or close again, if there is a rapid spread of the virus, or if directed by local officials.
- **Risk remains. We are still living in the midst of a global pandemic.** The Diocesan Guidelines and local plans cannot eliminate the risk. Our goal is act intelligently and faithfully to reduce risk to one another and to our communities.
- **Phase Two for Reopening the Diocese, "A Modified Return to Public Worship," applies to worship services and church office operations only.** For the time being, other church activities and use of facilities by outside groups remain suspended. Please focus on the immediate next step. It will be much easier to consider Phase Three, and a broader reopening, after we've had some experience with worship and office work.
- **Continue to offer live-stream and recorded services for individuals or families who should stay home and those who choose to do so.** If your church is not equipped to do this, diocesan staff can help; we encourage you to consider alternative ways of connection with your parishioners, as well. It need not be fancy or expensive.
- **Be practical and, as much as possible, keep worship services simple as you reopen.** Morning Prayer is beautiful and logically simple. Meeting outside is easier than inside for spreading out and for cleaning. In figuring out the mechanics of offering the Eucharist, do not lose sight of the purpose or the several components that create the fullness of the Eucharistic feast. *Do not discard theology and tradition for the sake of "making it happen."*

Across the 66,000 square miles of the Diocese, the pandemic landscape remains as varied and unpredictable as it was the day this all started. Comparing confirmed cases from May 4th to May 19th shows that nine of our 60 counties are still experiencing a significant presence of the virus. Eight counties report between 10 to 25 confirmed cases during this time, and twenty-two of our counties report fewer than 10 new cases. In eleven counties, there has been no increase during that time period. Keeping up with the rapidly changing data plus the different ways information is reported and interpreted is daunting, but to ignore it or to not take it seriously is to increase the risk to those we love.

While I am entrusting the development and implementation of plans for phased reopening and modified worship to local leadership, please do not hesitate to contact diocesan staff with

questions, particularly if you feel like your plan may be bumping up against the boundaries of the Guidelines.

Like the Israelites returning from Babylon, we, too, will be rebuilding. We will need to rebuild our worship, fellowship, and ministries. There will be joy and grief. And like the Israelites, we will be remembering. We will begin again to “sing the Lord’s song,” remembering his love and faithfulness that endures and redeems and saves. We will remember and celebrate that, even in the midst of disruption, the love of God abides. Hold fast to the hope that is yours in Christ Jesus.

Love in Christ,

+David M. Reed
Bishop of West Texas

Introducing Guidelines for Episcopal Schools Summer Programs

By the Rt. Rev. David M. Reed

June 1, 2020

Guidelines for Episcopal School Summer Programs, between May 31 and August 31, 2020, require that School Heads and Rectors work together to draft and implement customized plans that honor the intent of the Guidelines for Phased Church Reopening while making practical, reasonable, and safe accommodations for the local needs of our schools.

Dear Heads of School and Priests with Schools,

Let's begin with thanks. Thank you all for the hard work you have done, and continue to do, to address the COVID-19 pandemic. While everyone has faced disruption and uncertainties, our communities' schools have faced some particularly daunting challenges. Your leadership; your commitment to your school's mission; and your care for students, families, faculty, and staff in these difficult times have been essential to weathering this storm. You are an inspiration and a sign of hope.

The Episcopal Diocese of West Texas' Guidelines For Phased Reopening of Churches for public worship and the church offices, issued May 1st, did not address the reopening of Episcopal schools within the Diocese. At that time, schools throughout the country were closed for the remainder of the school year, with no known date for reopening.

A few weeks later on May 18th, Texas Governor Greg Abbott issued [Executive Order No. GA-23](#), which states, "Beginning June 1, 2020, public school districts may offer, and public education students may accordingly visit school campuses for, in-person classroom instructional activities and learning options, such as summer school programs, ... under the minimum standard health protocols found in guidance issued by the Texas Education Agency (TEA). Private schools and institutions of higher education may reopen campuses and are encouraged to establish similar standards to allow students, teachers, and staff to return to schools for the limited purposes set forth above."

In response to this change, and in consultation with Deputy for Episcopal Schools Mary Katherine Duffy, the diocesan Chancellor, and other diocesan staff, I am now issuing Guidelines for Episcopal School Summer Programs, for schools within the Diocese which wish to offer a summer program. The Guidelines are attached; before you read them, please keep in mind the following assumptions and rationale.

First, these Guidelines assume that all normal and pandemic-related requirements, guidelines, and policies set by the state, by licensing agencies, and by your accrediting bodies are being followed.

Second, if your school is planning a summer program, you will develop and display sanitization and other safety protocols to protect staff and students. To have this plan in writing is important to the Diocese and will be even more important to your parents, faculty, and staff prior to their return to the school.

Third, the Diocese does *not* categorize our Episcopal schools as “outside groups” in relation to their churches. The Phase Two Guidelines to reopen church and church offices do not allow outside groups to resume meeting on site and do not permit in-person church meetings or gatherings of any kind. The Diocese recognizes our Episcopal schools as a ministry of the churches and a vital part of the life of a congregation. However, because of the nature of our schools’ mission, the Diocese will regard their Summer Programs separately from other church meetings and formation activities at this time.

Fourth, these school Guidelines assume intentional and sustained cooperation between the Heads of School, Rectors or Vicars with schools, and other church and school leaders regarding the implementation of a school’s summer programming. This collaboration is a wonderful practice all the time, but is essential now, especially if churches and schools share facilities.

Fifth, these Guidelines are intentionally not elaborate or lengthy. We understand and appreciate that licensing and accrediting agencies have standards and requirements that you must follow that may be stricter than the diocesan Guidelines.

In simplest terms, these school Guidelines require that School Heads and Rectors work together to draft and implement customized plans for summer programs that honor the intent of the Guidelines for Phased Church Reopening while making practical, reasonable, and safe accommodations for the local needs of our schools. Your plan does not need to be exhaustive, but it should address key aspects of summer programming and be easily understood by all who will need to know the protocols.

The plan should be approved by the Head of School, your Board of Trustees, the Rector or Vicar, and the church’s Senior or Bishop’s Warden, then submitted for review and approval to the Diocese before the opening date of your program. Please submit your school’s plan to Mary Katherine at mkd@mkduffyconsulting.com.

If you would like more information about what your local plan might incorporate, please don’t hesitate to reach out to Mary Katherine. As always, she stands ready to support you in your work. Several of you have already shared some excellent plans with her, and we will make every plan available to all of you. There is no need to try to figure this out alone.

As we have urged our clergy, so I would urge our Heads of School: pay attention to your local situation regarding COVID-19. Keep up with developments and seek the guidance of local medical and public health officials. The mantra across the Diocese these days is, “Everything is subject to change.” As churches and schools within the Diocese begin to reopen, we do so fully aware that the pandemic has not gone away, and with the understanding that should the situation worsen, we may need to restrict public gathering once more.

In conclusion, a word to rectors with schools. Given that our churches are in Phase Two – a Modified Return to Public Worship, which does not permit other church activities (whether on- or off-site), you may well get questions about the reopening of church schools - “Why can the students come for class, but parishioners can’t gather for Sunday school?” Knowing that no answer will satisfy everyone, I offer a few thoughts in response to these inevitable questions. The diocesan Phase Two Guidelines are focused solely on the next right step: reopening our churches for in-person worship. Once congregations have adapted to this new reality and experienced the amount of time and work needed to stick to our protocols, then we may begin to

consider resuming in-person Bible studies, fellowship, and other meetings, taking into consideration the local progress of the pandemic at that time.

Keep in mind that our schools are routinely held to higher standards of safety, cleanliness, and hygiene than our churches, and must maintain a healthier environment to satisfy licensing and accrediting agencies. They are better equipped and more accustomed to cleaning and sanitizing spaces on a daily basis than churches.

Most compellingly, our schools depend on revenue from student enrollment. All of our schools have been closed since March. If they do not reopen for summer programs or are unable to announce plans to reopen for the 2020-2021 academic year, many of their students may not return.

You know the importance of the work you do, and the countless ways you are called to lead and serve your school communities. The Episcopal Diocese of West Texas is better and stronger because of the ministry of our schools. Thank you again for your love and devotion to your students, their families, and your staff. If I can be of assistance to you, please don't hesitate to call on me.

May the Lord bless, guide and encourage you. May he keep you safe, and make you strong.

Faithfully yours in Christ,
+David

David M. Reed
Bishop of West Texas

Guidelines for Episcopal School Summer Programs, Effective May 31 – Aug. 31

Episcopal schools within the Diocese of West Texas that wish to hold day camp, summer school, refresher courses, or other student group activities this summer may do so after meeting the following requirements.

1. The Parish or Mission associated with the School has returned the required Covenant to the diocesan office and has developed (or is developing) their church plan to implement the diocesan Guidelines for Phased Reopening of Churches.
2. The School will prepare a written plan to reopen which incorporates Texas licensing mandates (as applicable); state public health requirements and recommendations; and applicable parts of the Diocese of West Texas Guidelines for churches.

The school's plan should be developed in cooperation with the church's Rector or Vicar (or Wardens, in the absence of regular clergy). If facilities are shared by church and school, the plan shall include protocols to handle this shared space. The plan must be approved by the School Board, as well as by the Rector/Vicar and Senior/Bishop's Warden.

3. The School will submit its plan to the Bishop's Deputy for Episcopal Schools, Mary Katherine Duffy, at mkd@mkduffyconsulting.com, for review and approval before the starting date for summer programming. Any significant deviations from the above criteria should be explained.
4. The School will communicate its plan in writing to parents, faculty and staff, and provide additional training for school personnel, as needed, to implement the plan.
5. The Head of School, or designee, will agree to monitor the successful implementation of the plan and to stay informed about local conditions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.

Regarding Summer 2020 Church Apportionments, from the Rt. Rev. David M. Reed

June 2, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

During its May 26th meeting, the diocesan Executive Board voted to authorize the Bishop's Office to provide for apportionment cancellation for the months of May, June, July, and August, in response to the continuing economic hardships created by the COVID-19 pandemic and upon request by individual congregations. During its discussion, the Executive Board unanimously approved a resolution presented by the diocesan Finance Committee and amended it to extend through the entire summer.

The Executive Board's original decision to cancel April apportionments was made to relieve anticipated economic hardship, even before they became fully known. A few churches still submitted April apportionment payments, for which we can all be thankful, but a diocesan survey in May revealed that almost all of our 87 churches are experiencing a loss of income and many are experiencing significant financial stress. Last week's resolution will support churches as they begin to reopen, on a case-by-case basis.

Unlike the cancellation of April apportionments for all churches in West Texas, this action provides for individual consideration and requires church leadership to provide financial information for each month for which relief is sought. This is a need-based opportunity, and churches that have not paid their apportionment for January, February, or March will be expected to pay those months or make arrangements to begin paying, before reduction in a summer month apportionment will be considered. And of course, I urge clergy and congregational leaders to continue to encourage their members to honor pledges and give generously and gratefully.

In response to the loss of the April apportionments, Diocesan staff reduced their 2020 ministry and program budgets by 8.33% and have carefully reduced expenses as well. In April, I also suspended new staff hires and the search for an Assistant Bishop. We have not had to let any staff members go, and we are working hard to avoid further budget cuts, while also offering support and relief to our churches.

For any church interested in requesting apportionment cancellation during one or more of the summer months, the required documents ([see attached request form](#)) will be readily available and should not create an undue burden. Submit applications to Canon Caroline Mowen at caroline.mowen@dwtx.org. They will be reviewed by Treasurer Ted Burkhart, Financial Officer Susan Hardaway, Canon Mowen and me.

If you have questions, please contact Canon Mowen at caroline.mowen@dwtx.org or 210-415-7372. Thank you for your commitment to the life and ministries of your church in these difficult and uncertain times.

Faithfully yours in Christ,
+David

**David M. Reed
Bishop of West Texas**

"THE SPIRIT WAS THERE: CONGREGATIONS IN WEST TEXAS EXPERIENCE BOTH GRIEF AND JOY AS IN-PERSON WORSHIP RESUMES"

By Emily V. Kittrell, Director of Marketing & Communications

June 12, 2020

Following the Rt. Rev. David M. Reed's release of Guidelines for Phased Reopening of Churches and permission for churches to begin phased reopening for modified in-person worship after Sunday, May 24th, approximately 16 of the 87 worshipping communities in the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas held in-person services beginning May 31st. That number doubled on Sunday, June 7th, with 16 more congregations opening their doors, and 10 additional churches indicated their intentions to open June 14th on Covenants provided to the diocesan office during the month of May. At this time, a handful of churches plan to open their doors in late June, and more have not yet decided upon a date for reopening.

The Phase 2 "Modified Return to Public Worship" guidelines provide protocols for churches to follow for facilities, employees, volunteers, and for attendees. Protocols include cleaning and disinfecting all regularly touched surfaces and seats or pews between every service, making hand sanitizer readily available, eliminating provisions of food or drink, screening employees and volunteers for potential illness, ensuring six feet spacing between attendees, requiring face masks, distributing communion in one kind, and suspending in-person formation and childcare services, to name a few.

As plans and logistics are worked out so that churches can align their daily operations and weekly services with Phase 2 guidelines for reopening, clergy and lay leadership wrestle with logistics coordination and managing expectations. Regarding this phased reopening, Bishop Reed stated with clairvoyance in a letter to the diocese on May 21st that, "We need to understand that it will not be the same. As churches across the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas prepare their phased reopening plans for modified public worship, we need to know that the services we will be returning to will be less, *for a season*, than what we remember and have been longing for. We will be like the Israelites returning after a long exile and beginning to rebuild the Temple - it will bring us joy, and at the same time, we will also feel disappointed that it is not the same."

During interviews for this article, priests were asked about the demographics of parishioners who attended in-person worship after opening their doors. Unanimously, they shared that they were missing the youngest (children and families requiring childcare services disallowed during current phase) and the oldest (80+) generations of members. While they received some resistance to new protocols, the overwhelming majority of in-person participants gladly followed new health and safety guidelines.

Many church leaders lament over the struggle to transition into online-only services as well as the shift back into modified in-person services. St. Alban's in Harlingen began offering 'hybrid' services on May 31st. "I grieve the loss of church as it was," shared The Rev. John Inserra, Rector of St. Alban's. He continued, "As a priest who likes church, I grieved that online church wasn't going to be the same, and then I grieved, selfishly, for the loss of momentum we had and how that could reflect on my leadership. I had to work through all of that, and it took me a while. I did not embrace the live stream right away. We would pre-record services and they weren't great. We weren't putting our best effort into it because I felt like we would save our best effort

for when we're on the other side of this. It took me a little while to realize that this might be how that 85-year-old person participates in church for the rest of their life. They deserve to have something that's not an afterthought. So now, we call it a 'hybrid' service: in person and online, where we intentionally make it something that people at home feel they can continue to connect with."

St. Helena's in Boerne opened their doors for the first time in twelve weeks on Sunday, June 7th. Reflecting on the planning process for returning in-person, the Rev. David G. Read, Rector of St. Helena's shared, "The amount of detail was incredible. The protocols that the diocese came out with were really helpful, but getting down to the nitty gritty of 'who, what, when, where, and how' is a serious task that can feel overwhelming."

On the first day back in person, St. Helena's experienced 25% of their average Sunday attendance. Read stated, "Our biggest loss is even though it's a big step to reconvene public worship, we're still incomplete because so many people still aren't ready to be at a public gathering again. We're incomplete until all of us can gather again and feel safe."

While so many are experiencing deep pain at the loss of normalcy and fellowship, there is great joy in even a modified return to liturgy, communion, and community. Rev. Read expressed delight over simply having others in the room, sharing that hosting 25 vestry members and ushers for a training prior to reopening brought him to tears, "I hadn't realized how much I missed it. People are so longing for connection, community, and their church family. Just hearing people talking before and after the service was wild. It was wonderful to see and hear the people reconnecting and loving the church family and community that they haven't been able to be a part of, except for online."

The Rev. Jan Dantone, Rector of Epiphany Church in Kingsville, has offered two in-person Sunday services since reopening their doors on May 31st. She stated, "We have only two active cases of the coronavirus in Kleberg Country right now, so we've been very eager to return to our space. Since we have, it is just wonderful to be back together. It is so much better to be preaching to people than to a camera, and it is a true joy to see the kids again."

The Pentecost service at St. Alban's brought similar joys and a powerful revelation for the Rev. John Inserra, "Everybody came away from that first service thinking that the service was so much better than we had worried about. We were expecting church service in a hospital waiting room. It was going to be so sterile, and heartless, and spiritless. And it wasn't. *The Spirit was there.* For a lot of us clergy, and maybe for lay people, there was a thought that it's only church if we have the same elements we are accustomed to. It feels like the same story of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. Maybe all the stuff we love, that we thought is what makes up Christmas, is not what Christmas is about at all. Maybe all the stuff of 'Church' wasn't what made 'Church' in the first place. Maybe there was, in fact, something else that makes it feel the way it does, and we just thought it was all these exterior things, and not the Spirit itself."

In his opening letter to the guidelines for phased reopening of churches, Bishop Reed offered encouragement to church leaders that continues to be true, as churches begin to open their doors, "Everywhere I look in the Diocese of West Texas, I see signs of hope and powerful reminders that although we are temporarily confined by the novel coronavirus, we are not defined by it. It is the risen Christ who claims us and defines us. I see this Easter life in the countless ways that you

have continued worship and ministry in the name of Christ and your determination to make that happen...We have traveled a long way during these past months.”

Currently, there are four phases for reopening the diocese outlined in the guidelines for reopening in West Texas. Phase 1 – Stay at Home Orders and Work Safe – prohibits all in-person church meetings, events, and gatherings while video and online worship becomes a part of our life together. Phase 2 – A Modified Return to Public Worship – the current operational phase, allows for modified in-person worship with proactive health and safety protocols, and church offices reopen where facilities can accommodate proper social distancing and proper sanitizing. Online worship continues as a supplement to in-person worship under this Phase. Phase 3 – A Full Return – lifts all restrictions on in-person worship, formation, meetings, ministries and gatherings after mass vaccination is available. Phase 4 – A Time for Reflection – invites the church to discern ways to reflect on how we’ve changed and what we’ve learned in the process.

As churches begin opening their doors for worship services following Phase 2 guidelines, diocesan leadership recognizes the necessity for further phases of re-opening to be permitted for implementation *prior to beginning Phase 3 "Full Return to Worship."* The Bishop, Standing Committee, and Diocesan Staff are currently developing Phase 2b guidelines, allowing for some in-person meetings and childcare to be offered on church campuses with safety measures for the continued health and safety of all individuals. These Phase 2b guidelines and protocols are expected to be released the week of June 15th.

News, resources, and information regarding the diocesan response to COVID-19 can be found at dwtx.org/covid19. To receive updates in your email inbox, please send your contact information to communications@dwtx.org.

The Next Right Step: Responding to Increasing COVID-19 Rates

By the Rt. Rev. David M. Reed, Bishop of West Texas

July 1, 2020

*For God alone my soul in silence waits;
from him comes my salvation.
He alone is my rock and my salvation,
my stronghold, so that I shall not be greatly shaken.
Put your trust in him always, O people,
pour out your hearts before him, for God is our refuge.*
Psalm 62:1-2, 9

Dear Friends in Christ,

A few weeks ago, I could almost see light at the end of this long COVID-19 tunnel. After three months of relative isolation, the situation in Texas and other places was looking brighter. Many churches in the Diocese of West Texas were cautiously and partially reopening.

Now, of course, that perspective has changed as the virus has spread rapidly and dangerously throughout the state and many of our communities, reaching impact levels far beyond what we had experienced previously. Confirmed case counts and positivity rates are climbing, and in many parts of the Diocese, hospitals and medical care are being stretched very thin.

Since issuing diocesan Guidelines for Phased Reopening of Churches on May 1st, almost all of our 87 congregations have developed excellent and thorough plans to guide their gradual reopening, as well as position their church to respond quickly when the pandemic surges, as it is doing now. In the areas where COVID-19 is spreading rapidly, almost all of our churches have cancelled in-person worship, delayed reopening, or further reduced in-person gatherings. Most continue to offer live-stream or recorded services and other opportunities for people to gather online.

Thank you to all our clergy and lay leaders who have worked so hard to develop plans and have been so careful in their implementation. As you continue to make decisions regarding suspending or resuming in-person worship services or gatherings, please keep [Archdeacon Mike Besson](#) informed. The diocesan office receives frequent questions from clergy and lay leaders throughout the diocese, wondering what other churches are doing, and being able to provide relatively current responses is helpful to our shared ministry.

Now is the time, individually and as churches, to recommit fully to using the basic tools available to us to reduce risk to our congregations and our communities:

- Maintaining habits of physical distancing in public, by six feet or more
- Wearing a mask at all times when in close contact with others
- Staying home, if you or a family member experiences any COVID-19 symptoms
- Sanitizing shared areas and surfaces frequently
- Washing your hands thoroughly and frequently

Congregations gathering in person for worship, should do all of the above, and also

- Remember gathering outside is less risky than gathering inside
- Continue following and communicating your local protocols
- Consult regularly with local health and medical professionals
- Be mindful that singing is much riskier than speaking; health experts recommend maintaining 10 to 12 feet of separation between singers, and many recommend no congregational singing at all.

In addition to these best practices, stay informed about the current situation in your county. Following new consensus from public health officials, the "14-day consistent decline in confirmed cases" is now just one of several indicators that public health and medical professionals monitor carefully. Local church leadership should consider all of the following indicators as part of any decision regarding in-person offerings:

- **Positivity rate:** the percentage of positive cases, comparing the number of new confirmed COVID-19 test cases to the total new test results
- **Doubling rate:** the number of days it will take for the number of confirmed cases to double; a smaller doubling rate predicts a faster spread
- **Hospitalizations:** the daily count of patients admitted to hospitals for COVID-19 as well as numbers of patients in Intensive Care Units (ICU) and on ventilators

In the larger population centers within the Diocese, all of these numbers are increasing dramatically. County-by-county information is easily accessible and updated daily on the [Texas Department of Health & Human Services website](#). Numerous other websites provide similar information and are listed on the diocesan website, at [dwtx.org/covid19](#).

The big spikes, day-to-day anxieties, and future uncertainties are taking a toll on all of us. We are sick and tired of COVID-19, and also just plain tired. However, recommitting to reducing risk is grounded in our call and commitment to love one another as Christ loves us. Wearing masks and keeping our distance is one way, but checking in on one another will be just as important in the days to come. Call someone you care about, write a note, send a text, or email. Check on your clergy, and tell them thank you.

I've said and written several things during the past few months that hindsight and ongoing developments in the pandemic have rendered naïve or foolish. But this remains true: Jesus is Lord, COVID-19 will not prevail, and we are being led through this awful time together, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

We would not choose this hard pilgrimage in place, but it is what we have been given, and odd as it sounds, God is offering us new, and renewed, ways of being Kingdom people. So let's say our prayers, keep our eyes open, and stick together.

Love in Christ,

+David M. Reed
Bishop of West Texas

The Next Right Step: Updated COVID-19 Guidelines for Clergy and Congregations

By the Rt. Rev. David M. Reed, Bishop of West Texas

August 13, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We are now in the sixth month of living with, and responding to, the COVID-19 pandemic, and as individuals, families, churches, and a society, we are weary and anxious. The present is challenging; the future is uncertain. Our Christian hope tells us that *this* is never “all there is,” and yet, so much about life these days is confusing and chaotic. Within the Church, we are constrained from the very things that bring us comfort, strength and hope—gathering together for worship, fellowship, and mission. God is our Creator who delights in his creation and makes us for communion with him *and with one another*. Our salvation is incarnational, and we are not meant for isolation and aloneness. Of course, we are weary and anxious!

Our governing principle throughout this pandemic has been to love God and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. We have sacrificed practices that are important to us, like public worship, for the love and safety of our neighbors in church and our neighbors in the larger community. The diocesan guidelines and the protocols adopted by churches locally are intended to flesh out this love. *These guidelines are not intended to hinder our churches*, but to help us all find ways to be a worshipping, serving, and Christ-centered community in these times.

In and through all of this, the Light of Christ shines on, and “the darkness has not overcome it.” (John 1:5) So many of our churches in West Texas, so many of *you*, continue to find ways, by grace, to be the Church and carry on in worship and ministry. Thank you, and thanks be to God, for your faithfulness and your visible witness to the power and love of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

As we approach September, normally a time of regathering and new beginnings in our congregations and wider communities, it is important for your church’s leadership to review the Guidelines for Phased Reopening of Churches in West Texas. *Remember that the basic, practical measures recommended by medical and public health officials really do work.* Do not neglect to conscientiously

- *wear face masks*
- *maintain six feet of physical distance from others whenever possible*
- *practice good hygiene, and*
- *sanitize common areas.*

Churches open for in-person worship are still required to adhere to the diocesan guidelines, to maintain their own plans, and to pay careful attention to current local conditions and the health orders and recommendations of local and county officials.

I encourage all our churches to take full advantage of online technologies for gathering people for worship, study and fellowship. Many of our churches report they intend to continue live-streaming worship even after restrictions on in-person gatherings are lifted. If your church needs assistance figuring out live-streaming, recording, hardware, etc., please contact the diocesan [Communications Office](#).

Our current diocesan guidelines allow for in-person worship inside and outside church buildings; in-person Vestry/Bishop's Committee meetings; in-person AA and other 12-step recovery meetings; and continuing outreach ministries that meet an immediate need.

Further, I have given the 26 Episcopal schools of the Diocese permission to reopen after they develop detailed plans and following guidelines from the CDC, State of Texas, and school associations. Their starting date for in-person classes must be approved by their Vestries, and almost all of our schools will *not* bring students back on campus until after Labor Day.

While we continue these practices, we can also begin to look ahead, toward the next phase of reopening. Because our church leaders have worked so conscientiously to develop plans for a modified return to in-person worship, and because parishioners have acted so consistently out of love and care for one another while worshiping together in person, I am confident that we can move toward further reopening, particularly regarding in-person activities on church premises, in those places where the spread of the pandemic has ebbed.

We will call this **Phase 2(b): A Modified Return to Congregational Life**, and the previous phase, in place from May 25, 2020 – September 14, 2020, will now be referred to as Phase 2(a): A Modified Return to Public Worship. Beginning Monday, September 14, churches may offer in-person gatherings for the following purposes: Adult Bible study/Christian formation; youth and children's Sunday School; youth groups; and Childcare. Additionally, on a case by case basis and at the discretion of the clergy and Vestry/Bishop's Committee, outside groups may be allowed to resume in-person gatherings at the church. And clergy and Vestries/Bishop's Committees may allow for some in-person gatherings even if the church has not reopened for in-person worship.

Deferred pastoral services, such as baptisms, may be held, assuming protocols are followed to the fullest extent possible. Baptisms are intended to take place within the context of Sunday worship, however, the Prayer Book rubrics allow for baptisms in other circumstances. Private, family-only baptisms, held inside or outside the church building, are an option. Also, clergy are permitted to visit the dying and offer the sacraments, if they are able to follow medical and safety protocols.

This next phase of reopening, Phase 2(b), assumes careful planning by clergy and lay leadership specifically for the added in-person activities, and a written plan that is communicated to all members of the congregation. Each congregation must submit their plans for Phase 2(b) to the [Rev. Mike Besson](#), Archdeacon, prior to entering into this next phase.

The Diocesan Guidelines for Phased Reopening have been updated to reflect the protocols for both Phases 2(a) and 2(b). See pages 4-8 of the Guidelines for the safety, sanitation, and hygiene guidelines that apply to all permitted gatherings.

I advise church leadership, *even if no plans for further reopening are taking place*, to revisit the Guidelines to ensure compliance, especially regarding protocols for communion and wearing masks. All those responsible for leading gatherings with participants must be made aware of the diocesan and congregational protocols and agree to abide by them.

Churches are encouraged not to try and do everything at once, but to gradually implement in-person gatherings, assessing and adjusting as needed. In communities experiencing outbreaks, *planning* for further reopening is encouraged, but adding more in-person gatherings is strongly discouraged. And none of this is intended to mean that churches *should* begin a wider phased reopening. Quite a few of our churches have faithfully and wisely chosen to refrain from any in-person gatherings until we are much further down this road.

As we have experienced, further reopening of the life and ministries of our congregations must be carefully considered, weighing numerous factors, both within and beyond the local church. I ask that clergy and lay leaders strive to stay fully informed regarding *all* of the following criteria:

- The positivity rate: out of all tests, the percentage that are positive
- The increase/decrease in daily confirmed cases in your city or county
- The local hospital situation: how many COVID patients? How many available beds? How many COVID patients are in ICU? How many available ventilators? In other words, how taxed is the hospital system in your area?
- Testing capacity in your area
- The doubling rate: the number of days projected for the confirmed cases to double

The State of Texas, and numerous other government agencies and medical organizations maintain websites with daily updates for the above information.

While preparing their local reopening plans and protocols, church leadership should assess their own spaces and consider these and other questions:

- How many people can we gather in the nave for worship, or in other church facilities, following the guidelines?
- Can we maintain adequate sanitation in a timely manner for each gathering and each type of gathering?
- What options do we have for outdoor worship and other gatherings?
- What in-person gatherings would be considered highest priority, and what can wait?
- How many of our parishioners are in categories of increased vulnerability? What are we offering as means of connection for those considered high-risk?
- Has our city/county issued directives/recommendations limiting the size of gatherings or advising that people stay home?

In all these things, we need to stay mindful that we cannot eliminate the risks COVID-19 brings to any gathering, and so our goal remains to act carefully and prudently to reduce risks for the sake of our churches and the larger community.

All our plans, no matter how well done, are subject to change, depending on the course of the pandemic. We saw during the terrible June and July spike the importance of including in our reopening plans a plan for *reclosing*. Every parish, mission and school preparing to reopen for any level of activity should have contingency and communication plans in place to address the following:

- A church staff member, school staff member, or regular volunteer tests positive, reports covid-like symptoms, or comes in close contact with someone who tests positive.

- A member of the church who attended a worship service, or a school student/parent tests positive, reports covid-like symptoms, or comes in close contact with someone who tests positive.
- An attendee at a church gathering other than worship tests positive, shows symptoms or comes into close contact with someone who tests positive.
- What factors would initiate postponing, canceling, or reclosing for in-person activities?

These updated guidelines can't possibly address every situation or answer every question. I welcome your questions, and members of the diocesan staff are always ready to assist you and your church in developing, communicating, and implementing your local plans. Archdeacon Mike Besson continually gathers information on what our churches are doing regarding reopening, and you can contact him at mike.besson@dwtx.org.

Thank you for your leadership and service during these difficult days. Our God is bigger than COVID, and these times will not last. May his Spirit sustain and encourage you, keep you healthy and fill you with peace.

Love in Christ,

**+David M. Reed
Bishop of West Texas**

A Small Step Forward: Updated COVID-19 Guidelines Effective April 22, 2021

By the Rt. Rev. David M. Reed, Bishop of West Texas

April 22, 2021

For you shall go out in joy, and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

Isaiah 55:12

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

There's a great day coming, when we shall all be free from the limitations, restrictions and disappointments of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our collective hope for 2021 has been that we would return to something closer to normal in our lives and in our churches.

Thanks be to God, we are...almost...but not quite...there.

As the pandemic numbers we watch so closely move steadily in the right direction and vaccines become widely available, COVID-19 is loosening its grip on us, and we can begin loosening some of the diocesan Guidelines that have been in place for more than a year.

However, we must temper our excitement and utter relief that the light at the end of this long tunnel grows nearer, balancing our eagerness with prudence and a vigilant awareness that we are not there yet. Questions about how to reopen our churches more fully are complex and uncertain, similar to the ones we faced while developing our initial Guidelines, and many precautions must still remain in place.

Effective immediately, the Diocesan Guidelines for Phased Reopening have been updated to reflect the adjusted protocols, referred to as Phase 2(c): Lifting Restrictions on Congregational Life. Below you can read a summary of the revisions to the Diocesan Guidelines, reflecting the changing landscape of the pandemic. They also consider the latest information from the CDC as well as perspectives offered by Episcopalian health and medical professionals within the Diocese.

Even as we will be delighted with these changes, we will also be disappointed at restrictions that must remain in place. As before, your church's clergy and lay leadership are entrusted with the great responsibility of determining whether or not these lifted restrictions are appropriate for your congregation at this time, or later. Church leadership should continue to pay attention to local guidance, public health officials, and COVID-19 statistics for the entire county, rather than just the local church population. Local data can be found [at this link](#).

While analyzing a congregation's local guidelines, consider the following:

- Positivity rates
- Cases per 100,000 people
- Hospitalization rates
- ICU occupancy
- County and state vaccination percentages of adults 16+

I truly believe that our 87 churches have played a significant part in the battle against COVID-19. Nobody likes the masks, social distancing, and severe limitations on worship and ministries, yet these sacrificial acts of love have served our communities well. And so, a thousand thank-yous for all you have done to stick together, extend grace and patience, and keep following Jesus through so many challenges.

Please read the Revised Guidelines carefully. Vestries and Bishop's Committees should study them alongside your local protocols. Your questions are always welcome. Archdeacon [Mike Besson](#) remains the primary point of contact, though all diocesan staff are available to support your church.

We are all tired of all of this, but we are so much closer to arriving on the other side. How much better for all of us - and how much more is God glorified - when we continue to walk together, one in Christ, saying in all things, “Nevertheless, know this: the Kingdom of God has come near.”

Love in Christ,

David M. Reed
Bishop of West Texas

Introducing Phase 2(c): Lifting Restrictions on Congregational Life

As you will recall, the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas announced on March 3, 2021, following Governor Greg Abbott’s new orders to rescind most COVID-19 restrictions in Texas, that we would continue to uphold diocesan guidelines for Churches, Schools, and Camps. As of today, April 22, 23% of the Texas State population is fully vaccinated and around 45% of people over sixteen years old have received at least one dose of the vaccine. This is encouraging news, especially as the B.1.1.7 variant is circulating quickly in the United States.

From the beginning of the pandemic, we have tried to follow Jesus as we took each “next right step.” We have sought in word and deed, *and in the Guidelines*, to be cautious, but not fearful; to acknowledge anxiety, but not surrender to it; and to make decisions grounded in hope rather than wishful thinking. We have also asked God’s grace to give us wisdom, courage, and humility - humility so that we might be open to the knowledge and guidance of medical and scientific professionals.

Every requirement, recommendation, and explanation contained in the Diocesan Guidelines can be summed up in Jesus’ commands that we love one another as he loves us and that we love our neighbor as we love ourselves. As local churches implement the Phase 2(c) revisions, some may feel it is too soon to make changes and others may feel the changes are not enough. Love your neighbor, anyway; love one another like Jesus loves you.

Following the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guideline and in consultation with local medical professionals, the diocesan office presents revised Diocesan Guidelines for Phased Reopening of Churches: Phase 2(c): Lifting Restrictions on Congregational Life.

Effective immediately under Phase 2(c) the following practices are no longer required, and local leadership may discontinue them at their discretion:

- Cleaning surfaces between services is no longer required, but encouraged. This should permit use of altar rail, when six feet social distancing can be maintained between households, as well as prayer books, hymnals, etc. ([CDC Science Brief, April 5, 2021](#))
- Masks are optional for outdoor gatherings, when six feet social distance can be maintained between households.
- Masks are optional for Church Staff meetings, or any *closed* in-person meeting, where every invited individual is *fully* vaccinated and in-person meeting attendance does not exceed 12 people. ([CDC "When You've Been Fully Vaccinated," April 2, 2021](#)). **This option does not include any in-person gathering that is open to the public.** All church services, fellowship offerings, or faith education classes / Bible studies are considered open to the public, regardless of average Sunday attendance or date since receiving a newcomer.
- Fully vaccinated Clergy, Staff, and Volunteers are no longer required to quarantine after an exposure to the virus. ([CDC "When You've Been Fully Vaccinated," April 2, 2021](#))
- Clergy and Lay Eucharistic Visitors may bring communion to homebound/hospitalized people adhering to both the facility’s COVID-19 guidelines and Diocesan Guidelines for distributing communion.
- Processions are allowed, maintaining six-feet between individuals. Choral singing in procession is still discouraged.
- Clergy may greet worshippers after church, preferably outside. Dismissing people pew by pew is no longer needed; care should be taken to avoid crowded indoor lines and to maintain six-feet between households.

Until further notice, the following protocols to prevent the spread of COVID-19 *remain in place*:

- Masks are required indoors at public gatherings, even if participants are fully vaccinated. All church services, fellowship offerings, or faith education classes / Bible studies are considered open to the public, regardless of average Sunday attendance or date since receiving a newcomer.
- Clergy are not required to wear masks or gloves during the Eucharistic prayer, preaching, and reading. Lay worship leaders are not required to wear masks while speaking or reading to the congregation, when six feet social distancing can be maintained.
- Masks are not required outdoors, when six feet social distancing can be maintained between different households.
- Maintain six feet distance between members of different households, whether inside or outside, at all public gatherings and closed, in-person meetings. *As of March 19, 2021, the CDC has issued guidance that only K-12 schools may maintain 3 feet distances between students. The CDC has not changed their guidance for adults.*
- Food and refreshments are only permitted outside, when six feet social distancing can be maintained between households.
- Encourage hand washing and sanitation.
- Communion will be distributed in one kind only.
- Nurseries and childcare are permitted; see Guidelines for recommendations.
- In-person education and Christian formation classes for all ages are permitted, while adhering to Diocesan Guidelines for in-person gatherings.

As some diocesan restrictions relax, be aware that local, state, and federal conditions could change at any time, requiring a return to stricter guidelines or allowing for continued revisions. The diocesan staff will review our protocols every two to three weeks for the foreseeable future with this in mind. Bishop's Committees, Vestries, Clergy, and other congregational leaders should establish a regular review of local church guidelines and maintain steady communication with congregation members about any adjustments.